No Strings Attached
Luke 15: 11-32
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I can't hear the parable of the Prodigal Son without thinking of a charming anecdote which happened in a first grade church school class. The teacher had told the story very graphically: the runaway son, his fall into sin and vice: the joyful reunion: and the sulking older brother. "Now children," she said, "at the end of the story everybody is happy except one character. Do you know who that is?" Immediately a hand shot up and voice proclaimed: "The fatted calf!"

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is probably misnamed because it's really three stories woven into one. Different conclusions may be reached depending on which of the three stories we are considering. In the popular mind, the most important story concerns the younger son. However, when Jesus told it, the real thrust was probably in the story of the Elder Son. And it is my feeling that the relevance the parable has for men of all times and ages will be found in the story of a father's love.

Let's look at the story again. You know it well, but let's consider it again with an openness to the three major themes.

A young man, growing up on his father's estate, working daily in the fields, came to the conclusion that the time had come to break the ties and venture out into the stream of life - a not unnatural thing to want to do. His father did not attempt to dissuade him; but willingly gave his son all that he had coming. We can only speculate about the Son's motives. In a famous poem Rudyard Kipling has him say:

"My father glooms and advises me,
My brother sulks and despises me,
My mother catechizes me,
Till I want to go out and swear."

George Arthur Buttrick suggests that the young man was victim of the

"primevil lie", namely that there is freedom to be found once one casts aside all rules and restrictions.

I'm not sure either of those are very valid. I'm inclined to think that the young man did a normal and healthy and good thing: broke the tie, asserted his manhood, and walked into life as an individual. In a recent study group in this church Dr. Ralph Strong made what I thought was a very perceptive observation. We were talking about the painful problem of adolescent impatience and hostility toward parents. And Dr. Strong suggested that God made us that way: that civilization depends rather directly on young people becoming restless and sensing a strong need to move out on their own. In any case, let's give the young man the benefit of the doubt. Let's assume he was simply doing what comes naturally.

But then things began to go badly. Unaccustomed to money management and euphoric over his new found pleasure, he soon found himself broke. At the same time, the country he was visiting experienced a severe famine, and our young friend was reduced to feeding pigs. We should not miss the special kind of degradation intended here. Swine were unclean: there were religious restrictions involved: and the bottom of the barrel was indicated in the desparate young man's willingness to tend them, and even to want to eat their food. That is comparable to you and I being reduced to rummaging through our neighbor's garbage cans for something to eat.

Well, he "came to his senses", Luke reports. He thought about his plight, and motivated by hunger - real gnawing hunger, but perhaps also hunger for his father's love - he made a very important decision. He decided to return and he began to frame what he would say: "Father - I've sinned against God and you. I'm no longer fit to be your son: just treat me as a hired hand."

I can imagine him rehearsing that line over and over as he made the long trek home. I can imagine him going over the scene - his father at home, smiling the smug smile that say's "I told you so." I can feel his anxiety and shame and love and guilt.

And as he appeared down the road, torn, broken, dirty - his father saw him and literally ran out to meet him and embraced him. The well rehearsed apology was up-staged - he really hadn't needed it. And when it came - it came now in grateful response to this unexpected and incredible love. The father had taken the initiative: the father had born the burden of the first step: the father had extended his love in the face of every possible rationale for withholding it. The result is reconciliation -- healing -- salvation, if you will.

But the story is not over yet. An older brother is hurt: offended: jealous. He had not been prodigal: he never disobeyed his father: and never had he been treated to this extravagant show of affection. Even the words of his father, assuring him of the continuity of the relationship, fails to soothe. And the story ends with him sulking.

The single point of that story, or rather those three stories, has to do with love, unconditional love: love with no strings attached. The intent of the story is, I believe, to proclaim the exceptionally Good News that God's love for us is like the love of the father for his son; that is - an unconditional love dependent on nothing in us. The intent is also, I believe, to hold up a model of what human love - the love of men for other men - ought to be. It is a story about forgiveness - but with a difference. For this forgiveness is extended, not as a result of penetence and confession, but prior to any expression of contrition. This forgiveness comes first. It is consistant with everything the New Testament teaches at this point: namely that authentic forgiveness is a permanent attitude, not an occasional act.

That's what the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is all about. He came to proclaim the Good News. And the Good News was just this: there are no conditions to God's love: there are no strings attached: he loves all men regardless of who they are or what they are doing. Jesus lived his own life as a model of that Good News. He was singularly unimpressed with a man's moral credentials: he associated with the kind of people nobody loves.

Once when Peter raised the question of the duration of forgiveness, Jesus took it out of the realm of statistics by suggesting that forgiveness is to be extended 70 times: that is to say, infinetly. And finally, on his cross, as he died, he became that unconditional love as he forgave the very men who had driven the nails through his hands and feet.

That's Good News and that's also a model, in which context you and I ought to squirm a little. For we are very good at attaching conditions to the love of God, and attaching all kinds of strings to our own love. One way of viewing the history of religion is as man's concerted effort to make conditional that which by nature is unconditional. Jesus came as the embodiment of God's unconditional love: and for 15 subsequent centuries Christian men valiantly attempted to draw up lists of conditions. Simple lists at first - but then not so simple lists, until by the 16th century God's love seemed like a distant prize to be won by attending masses, saying prayers, making pilgrimages and buying indulgences. But then - the Good News was rediscovered. The Protestant Reformation proclaimed the love of God apart from men's rules. And then, tragically, the process of attaching strings began all over again. New kinds of lists were created: new conditions added. Until Protestants became the reincarnation of all that was wrong in pre-reformation Catholocism. Under the guise of exhorting men to good works and moral goodness, the love of God once again was made to sound like something men could earn if they tried hard enough.

It's almost as if there were something innate in the human condition that will not allow us to accept the unconditional love of God. It is obvious, as we look at history - but also as we look deeply within our own hearts - that we want to resist believing in a love with no strings attached.

Paul Tournier, Swiss Psychiatrist and theologian, points out that Freud has shown us "that guilt is awakened in the infant's mind by the fear of losing the love of his parents; and also that all the traumas of his mental life are connected with this doubt about being loved . . . The anxiety of

guilt is just this anxiety of being loved no longer. The child has the impression that his parents' love is conditional; that they will love him only on the condition that he is good." [p. 189, Guilt and Grace]

Tournier suggests that this is a universal human condition, and goes on to propose that men have always projected their guilt and anxiety over the loss of parental love on God. "They picture God as one who loves them only on the condition that they are good. . ." [p. 190] And it is, of course, just a very small step from one has bought into the idea of God loving on the condition of human goodness - to thinking about and establishing the specific conditions. That's exactly what much religion is - much Christianity - just so many strings attached to God's love. Do this - don't do that. And finally - "Repent!" I think all of us believe, somewhere deep down inside, that God forgives us only if we repent; that God loves us more if we come to him aware of our own sinfulness. I think all of us assume, that the brand of Christianity that bears down hard here: that preaches the hopeless sinfulness of men, and then sets forth the conditions of salvation in terms of saying certain words or doing certain things is probably the real thing. Tourneir, the Christian psychiatrist calls it a "wilderness of multiplied guilt." And I for one wish people would see it for what it is - not real Biblical Christianity - but a denial of the Gospel. I wish we could stop being uncomfortable about the fact that we are forgiven and loved of God - not because we asked him - but because that's just the way he is.

We do have trouble with this. We'd prefer it if we could merit God's love. It isn't just that God should love and forgive all men, when we have tried so hard to be good. That's precisely what the older son in the parable was saying. That's exactly what Jonah said when God forgave and spared the people of Ninevah. It isn't fair - they don't deserve it! But the Bible is consistant here. There are no strings attached to God's love. That's what the Psalmist meant when he confessed "If you kept a record of our sins, who could escape being condemned? But you forgive us, so that we should fear

God. That's the essence of the Gospel. God's love for you and me depends on nothing in us. We don't have to do anything - he loves us as we are: he forgives us long before we ask.

Now, what are the implications? What does it mean to believe in a God who loves me regardless of what I have done, and to accept unconditional love as a model for my own life?

Very briefly I think there are three areas we might be thinking about. First families and relationships between parent and child. I think the initial and most essential task of parenthood is to establish a feeling that love is, in fact, unconditional: that it does not depend on a child being good: that it comes from in here - not out there - and that nothing can diminish it. And I think a lot of us fail at precisely this point. Some parents fail overtly by verbalizing a child's worst fear: "Mama won't love you if you do that." Others fail covertly by witholding love and affection when the rules have been broken. I know it must sound awfully empty to the one being disciplined to hear that "this hurts me worse than it does you." But I think that message must, somehow, get conveyed. Even and particularly when your behavior displeases me, I love you enough to give my life for you.

The permissiveness of modern parents is a subject that is currently very popular. In fact there are those who can find in parental permissiveness the reasons for all our societal ills. Well I admit to having trouble with that because, first of all I don't know many parents who could legitimately be called permissive, but also because I feel the real crisis between parent and child is not permissiveness at all but a crisis of love that has suddenly been revealed to be quite conditional. I see lots of situations in which love depends on hair length or life style or dress. I see young people dismayed and lost because of the discovery that their parents care more about what the friends will think than about them. I see young people rebelling - not against rules and regulations, but against parents who have attached all kinds of strings to their love.

I think the basic workshop for God's unconditional love is the human family. And I think it is there that words like forgiveness and reconciliation must become realities.

Second - society. God's love for all manner of men means that all men are worthy and have dignity. That has lots of ramifications - penology, for instance. We know that our prisons rehabilitate no one: that they make hardened criminals harder and minor criminals major. We know that - but seem incapable of devising systems that reclaim lives rather than destroying them. We have not moved very far from the idea of "an eye for an eye" which philosophy Jesus taught, leaves everyone blind.

Finally - our personal relationship with God. If the parable of the prodigal son has anything to say to you and me personally it is that God is - to us - like that father was to his son. That is, he loves us: he forgives us: he comes down the road to embrace us before we have a chance to say "I'm sorry". In the story the son's confession came as a response to his father's unconditional love - and then - reconciliation took place. That's the way it can be for us. God forgives us before we ask, and our confession is the act by which we put ourselves in the position to experience his forgiveness. That means we are free -free from the old concern about our salvation - free from the nagging worry about condemnation - free from guilt and anxiety - free even from worry about death. That means we are free to live grateful and joyful lives: that means our faith can become a glad and happy experience to be shared and celebrated.

It means we have been given that which we most need: and that for which some men spend a life time trying to earn. God loves us - and there are no strings attached.

Amen.